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WASHINGTON OUTLOOK

A Bridge Too Foreign

Congress says "Buy America," but the Federal Highway Administration is going out of its way to choose Chinese, a Washington State congressman charges. Representative Brian Baird (D-Wash.) says the government is circumventing the law so it can purchase foreign steel for the \$6.2 billion project to rebuild the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge to better withstand earthquakes.

"Buy America" rules require that federal road projects use domestic steel unless the materials increase the project cost by 25%. Baird says the FHWA and Caltrans, California's transportation agency, are slicing up the project so the mandates apply to only small portions of the work. Baird has a parochial interest: Bay Bridge Fabricators LLC, a consortium of four Washington companies, will be cut out if Chinese steelmakers supply the 320 million pounds of steel needed.

The FHWA is unmoved by Baird's arguments. "The Federal Highway Administration is deeply committed to Buy America provisions in federal law," the agency said in a statement. But because only state funds are being used now, the federal Buy America provisions do not apply. Tony Anziano, toll bridge project manager for Caltrans, says it comes down to dollars and cents: "What we're trying to do is build a seismically safe bridge as quickly and in as cost-effective a manner as we can."

By Eamon Javers